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S. Luke: The Historian of the Infancy

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A SERMON

preached before the University of Cambridge
on Christmas Day, 1913



A. E. BROOKE, D.D.

Fellow, Dean and Divinity Lecturer of King's College,
Cambridge.

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Ὑμῖν σήμερον σωτήρ, ὃς ἐστιν Χριστὸς Κύριος,
ἐν πόλει Δανείδ.

On the Feast of the Nativity all Christians who read their Bible turn, I suppose, as a matter of course, to the Gospel according to S. Luke. It is there that we find the story as we like to hear it told. Some of us turn to him as the author of the stories of the Infancy, and others find in him the historian of the Incarnation as well. He has chosen the stories which tell us best what it means. And he has told them so that all of us, even the oldest, can find out their meaning. Learned and simple alike agree with Milton's preference for the third Gospel as against the first.

'See, how from far, upon the Eastern road,
The star-led wisards haste with odours sweet !
Oh, run, prevent them with thy humble ode,
And lay it lowly at His blessed feet ;
Have thou the honour first thy Lord to greet,
And join thy voice unto the Angel quire,
From out His secret altar touch'd with hallow'd fire.'

This preference is clearly marked in our services. It is fitting that the Second Lesson, at what is still *the* Christmas day service for most Englishmen, should be taken from S. Luke rather than S. Matthew. Our favourite hymns tell the same story. We choose those which owe their inspiration to S. Luke the

historian, and not to the record of S. Matthew the apologist. Later on we may meditate

‘How vain the cruel Herod’s fear
When told that Christ the King is near.’

how

‘Eastern sages at His cradle
Made oblations rich and rare’;

and raise our

‘Songs of thankfulness and praise’
to Him who was

‘Manifested by the star,
To the sages from afar.’

To-day we welcome the simpler tale of how the Glory of God was revealed to simple folk

‘When shepherds watched their flocks by night,
All seated on the ground.’

We do not want to follow the learned discussions in Jerusalem as to where Messiah should be born. We listen for the glad tidings to all mankind, ‘To you in David’s town this day, is born a Saviour which is the Christ the Lord.’ The sign we would find is the Babe to *human*, not to learned view, displayed.

One Christmas carol has found its way into all our hymn-books, the carol which Byrom wrote for his daughter more than a century and a half ago; and most Christians have adopted it as their call to Christians on Christmas morning to awake, to salute the happy morn, ‘whereon the Saviour of the world was born’: to adore the ‘mystery of love, which hosts of angels chanted from above’; to hear once more what the shepherds heard and saw, and how

‘Amazed the wondrous story they proclaim,
The first Apostles of His infant fame’;

and to learn our business of Christmas day

‘Let us like those good shepherds then employ
Our grateful voices to proclaim the joy,

as Byrom originally taught his daughter her Christmas lesson.

The Christmas message is that of the angels to the shepherds. Even when Charles Wesley, on his way to Church on Christmas morning, bade men hearken,

‘How all the welkin rings,
Glory to the King of kings,’

popular taste insisted on having in its place a call to listen to the angels,

‘Hark the herald angels sing,
Glory to the new born King.’

And the attempts of learned editors to make us change our ways have not so far met with marked success. It is the angels’ message that men want to hear. And the prose which calls the faithful to contemplate and adore the deeper mysteries of the Faith, ‘God of God, Light of Light, Very God, begotten not created, Word of the Father, Now is flesh appearing,’ finds expression for its praise in the words of the angelic song. To judge from our hymns we seem to have learned the lesson which the stories of the Infancy, as told us in the Canonical Gospels, surely are meant to teach, that while the learned are discussing, or disputing, about Messiah’s birth, simple folk know it already, for the angels, God’s messengers, have told them. And though we may not be ready to define with precision what we mean by angels, on Christmas day we thank God that they are telling them still. And it is S. Luke who has taught us to read the lesson right. No wonder that all Christians who read their Bible, or who would mark and learn its content, from the youngest member of Christ’s Church, admitted years before he can understand the privilege of admission to the fellowship of Christ’s religion, and beginning in the growing years to have some faint idea of what it means, to the oldest saint of God whose course

is nearly run, and who therefore knows better than anyone else that he is only just beginning his lesson, all alike take their Bible lesson for Christmas day from the pages of S. Luke. This marked preference is due neither to accident nor to caprice. If it is a popular judgment, it is a case in which the judgment of the people is sound and true. S. Luke gives us far more than the stories of the Infancy in a style which appeals to popular taste. He is *the* historian of the Incarnation. By his choice of incidents, and by each detail which he uses to give them adequate and convincing setting, he brings home to us, as no one else, the profound significance of the event for the whole world and for each man and woman in it. His portrait of the Jewish Messiah teaches us that He is the Saviour of the world. He does, indeed, put before us the Deliverer of a Chosen Nation, and in surroundings which are wholly Jewish; surely the product of genuine tradition, rather than of reconstruction by the help of the imagination. But he does more than this. He convinces us that these things were indeed done in a corner of Palestine, but their sound is gone out into all lands. He makes us feel and know that 'Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given.' And we are thankful that Handel was not learned enough to place the emphasis as it lies in the original Hebrew. 'And His name will be Wonderful, Counsellor, God to be Head, Ever Watchful Father, Prince of Peace. To the increase of His dominion and peace there shall be no end.'

S. Luke's first concern is clearly not, if the phrase may be pardoned, to write up the miraculous. The supernatural character of the great event to which his whole story leads up, and of which he intends it to be the setting and the interpretation,

is so little emphasized that it can be plausibly maintained that the excision of two verses would remove it altogether from the record. What he really cares to do is to make every man feel and know the great thing that God has done for the world and for everyone in it. Guided by his telling of the story we realize that the angels' message is to every man 'To you is born, in the city of David, a Saviour.' And yet the most striking feature of this wondrous tale is its purely Jewish setting. If the language is Greek the content is Aramaic. The Greek physician, whom St. Paul took with him from Troas as a companion of his journey, at the moment when the Spirit of Jesus drove him out of Asia to undertake the evangelization of Greece, or as we should say of Europe, has indeed become a Jew that he might be the Evangelist of all men, if this is altogether his handiwork. He may have got his language and style from the Old Testament in Greek. What he owes to the Septuagint is not yet fully realized or acknowledged. But this alone will not account for the background of these chapters. They take us back to Palestine before the catastrophe of A.D. 70. We hear the voices, the hopes and aspirations, and perhaps the fears, of the quiet in the land, who were waiting for the Consolation of Israel and the redemption of Jerusalem; their longing for the good time coming when God shall give to His Anointed the throne of David His father, and He shall reign over the house of Jacob, and of His Kingdom there shall be no end. This is a Jewish tale, so far as the setting is concerned; a tale of bygone years, surprisingly little coloured by the thoughts which later events must have brought home to the writer and his readers. He really has taken us to Palestine in the days of Herod the King. This is a fact of

literature which needs a better explanation than can be found by merely asking the question ‘Is anything too hard for the pen of the realist?’ and hardly waiting for a reply. It is easier to suppose that between the date of the story and the date of its telling something has happened which has proved its worth, and made the Jewish tale, at least to those who have eyes to see, the Gospel of the World.

That is the interpretation which Luke the historian offers us as a solution of the problem. In the light of later history, which he himself has helped to make, he has learnt what the birth of Jesus Christ means for the world. He has grasped the profound significance of the event, and he writes his first two chapters to make it clear to others. He has collected from Jewish Christians what they had to tell him of the Infancy. He has arranged the material which he received (either in written form or as oft told tales, we can hardly say which), shaped by Jewish minds. His narrative so arranged, culminates in the story of the wondrous Birth, and is so ordered as to bring out at each stage its significance for the world of men. In the stories which he has heard, or read, of the birth of the Baptist, he traces the working out of God’s plan for the world. He sees in the wonderful birth of the forerunner, whose parents were old, a fitting prelude to the greater wonder of Messiah’s birth. The forerunner is to prepare his own people for the coming of their King. In the announcements of God’s plan to the father of the Baptist, and even to the mother of his Lord, we are still within the limits of Palestine and the chosen people. Yet it is significant that when the son of Sirac interprets the words of Malachi in his praise of Elijah he speaks of the restoration of the tribes of Israel. Here the new

Elijah is to turn the disobedient to the wisdom of the just. It is not the restoration of Israel, but the reformation of men as men on which stress is laid. In the songs of Mary (or Elizabeth) and Zechariah it is the hopes of the Chasidim and not the Nationalists which find expression. God has holpen his servant Israel, to remember mercy. He swore to Abraham our father that He would grant deliverance from our enemies, to serve Him in holiness and righteousness. The knowledge of salvation comes to the people through the remission of sins, not through removal of the foreign yoke. The preparation of the Lord's people is not for world-wide empire, but for service of God and man. Yet we are still well within the limits of national hopes and expectations, and Chapter I. ends with the statement that the boy grew and was strengthened in spirit; and trained in the desert till the time of his shewing unto Israel.

Now the scene changes, or at least the outlook becomes wider. If we are still in the days of Herod the King, a decree has gone forth from Caesar Augustus, which affects the whole world as the author conceives of it. The Emperor of the world and his representative in Syria are the unconscious instruments of the working out of God's plan for every man. Without their knowing what they did, it has come about through their action that

'Once in Royal David's city
Stood a lowly cattle shed,
Where a mother laid her baby,
In a manger for his bed.'

Perhaps it is more scientific, certainly it is more profitable, to appreciate S. Luke's insight as a historian, than to spend our time in testing the accuracy of his dates. If his chronology is doubtful, his reading of history is good. For he has taught us and all the world that the message of the angels is

to every man who is doing his duty and earning his living like the shepherds. ‘To you is born this day, in the city of David, a Saviour who is an anointed Lord,’ whom God has set apart for the Lordship of men. And this is the sign, no remarkable conjunction of planets, no obvious interference with the ordered course of nature, but a Babe, lying in a manger. The Power of God has entered into human life, the life of the people. God’s help is given to men so that all can have it who will.

It is in the light of this true reading of history that we shall consider the explanation of it which S. Luke puts before us. He has seen himself, and he has done more perhaps than any other man to make the whole world see with him, the true import of the Birth at Bethlehem. He has set out the facts —call them legends if you will. We should be as ill-advised to deny the possible presence of legend in the account as we should to assume that it contains nothing else. Whatever its character may be, he has told the tale so that simple folk can learn what it means, the Divine entering into the conditions of human life; if not at their worst, yet at something like their lowliest. He offers us an adequate cause for results which cannot be questioned, the raising of human life by the power of the life of One Man, who claimed to be able to give to all who would come to Him the help they needed, to make their lives what God meant them to be. The Divine life entering the life of man, so that two whole and perfect natures, the Godhead and manhood, were joined together in one Person, never to be divided. God of God, who for us men and for our salvation came down from Heaven and was made MAN; and that without spot of sin to make us clean from all sin. And the sign of it, a Babe lying not even in a cradle, who shall

grow into the Son of Man, the MAN that had not where to lay His head. So S. Luke interprets the great event, and the course of the world's history ever since has in the main confirmed his interpretation. The more we study history the more difficult we find it to explain the Christ in the terms, within the limits, of present experience. Recent attempts to explain His Life and Person in the terms of the experience, the hopes and thoughts of His own people and times, do not promise better success. Eschatology is an important factor in the case. It does not offer the solution of the whole problem. The Jesus of the eschatologists is but a small part of the Jesus of history, a very small part indeed of the Christ that is and is to be. If we are wise we shall go on asking the question, 'How can these things be?' And the more we ask, perhaps the more content we shall be to accept, as a working hypothesis, the solution which S. Luke accepted and left on record in the angel's words, 'The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the Power of the Most High shall overshadow thee.' At least we must have a solution which secures the Real Manhood of the Helper and the efficiency of His sympathy and help. We shall not use the theory to deter others from coming to the Christ. Perhaps we shall, in proportion as we yield ourselves to the power of the Christ to bring us back to God, find in it the explanation of the mystery how the Christ can do what He has done for the world and for each one of us.

And to-day at least we shall throw in our lot with the plain folk who see and know, and not with the wise who dispute and doubt. It is S. Luke's shepherds who go straight to Bethlehem, and not S. Matthew's wise men, who waste their time in

Jerusalem and at Herod's court, who shall guide us to the heart of the matter. It is of the essence of the gospel of Jesus Christ that

'The first Noel the Angel did say

Was to certain poor shepherds in fields where they lay.'

And in the light of the hope for every man which was kindled then, and has never since gone out, each of us may find courage to make our own the prayer which some of us will soon be using elsewhere

Grant me Thyself, O Saviour kind,

Thy Spirit undefiled,

* * * *

That I may tread life's arduous ways

As Thou Thyself hast trod,

And in the might of prayer and praise

Keep ever close to God.

* * * *

Light of the everlasting morn,

Deep through my spirit shine,

* * * *

Till Thou art able to descry

Thy faultless image there.

